

A Well-Watered Mind

By Kim DeCicco

I was on Lewes Beach, reading under my umbrella, when I overheard the family's spat:

"Leave that T-shirt on over your bikini," the father said.

"Why? None of the other women are."

"You're a kid, not a woman."

"I'm thirteen!"

"Exactly."

"Mom!"

"I agree with your father."

"Arrrrrr!" the girl exclaimed as she stormed toward the bay, T-shirt in place.

I understood the girl's frustration. I could even smile about it. But my smile didn't spring from relief because I was now a middle-aged adult. No. My smile arose from the memory of the woman who helped me through my thirteenth year.

It was July 1989. I was three months past my thirteenth birthday, and my mother and I seemed constantly at war. I was more interested in spending time with friends than with family. I wanted to wear makeup and fashionable clothes—meaning tighter and shorter. I preferred dance class to homework, and I definitely preferred talking with my friends about boys over doing chores. According to my mother, I burst into argumentative fits if she dared question my choices.

That wasn't true. If I responded poorly, it was because she always told me no.

My parents, my grandmother, and I lived in a two-family house outside Philadelphia. Dad worked for the navy; Mom was a curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and Gran, a recent retiree, volunteered three days a week at the library.

On a bright Friday morning, Gran, who lived in the apartment upstairs, stopped by our kitchen on her way to the library. She was in time to witness another of the many heated arguments between my mother and me—this one about the miniskirt, on loan from a friend, I wanted to wear to the mall.

"What happened to the nice girl you used to be?" Gran asked as I stomped, red faced, around the room.

Her words stung, and they fueled my anger. "I am nice! She's the problem!" I pointed an accusatory finger at my mother.

“Anna!” Gran whispered and shook her head in warning.

I had gone too far.

With nostrils flared and lips pinched tight, my mother picked up the phone and dialed. She made three calls: the first was to her job, saying she wouldn’t be in until after lunch; the second was to my father, advising that she was driving to Delaware but would be back that afternoon; and the third was to Oma, my great-grandmother.

“Go pack for the weekend.” My mother looked at her watch. “We’re leaving in fifteen minutes.”

I was being sent away.

Oma and Opa, my great-grandparents, came to America from Germany in 1926, and they spent the next forty-two years building a new life in Philadelphia. When they retired in 1968, they wanted nothing more than to spend their remaining years in a quiet town near a beach, so they purchased a cottage in Lewes, Delaware. Opa passed seven years ago, leaving Oma alone in the house. She was happy by herself and made a point of saying so whenever my mother or Gran tried to convince her to move in with us. “Nein,” she’d say. “I love the beach. I will go back to Philly when I need burying.”

Late-morning sun highlighted short gray hair curled thick around a face lined for each of Oma’s eighty-six years. Rheumy eyes took my measure as I stood in the doorway, a small suitcase clutched in one hand and a book hugged to my chest with the other. Her lips pouted with sympathy as she opened her arms wide. Dropping my belongings, I flung myself into her embrace.

“It’s OK,” she soothed. “Let it out.” Her warm hand stroked my long brown hair. I knew her nails would be trimmed and unpolished, practical and square like her age-spotted hands. She pulled an ever-present handkerchief from her skirt pocket and dabbed my eyes, then handed it to me for my nose. “They have forgotten their own youth, how this age was for them.”

I nodded but didn’t understand. Mom and Gran at thirteen? It seemed impossible. They were Mom and Gran, not . . . people.

“Come.” Oma chucked me under the chin. “You are thinking too hard. Put your things away and we will have tea.”

Oma’s home faced a short side street that ran directly to the beach, giving us a clear view of Delaware Bay from the porch and front windows. The house remained unchanged since its purchase, except for the attic, which had been converted into extra sleeping space, with two dormer windows added to catch the breeze. That’s where I slept. The main floor consisted

of two tiny bedrooms, a bath, a small living room, and a kitchen large enough to fit a table and four chairs—as long as you pushed the chair in when opening the refrigerator.

A yellow Formica table already held a china pot and two mugs by the time I entered the kitchen.

“Sometimes, Anna,” Oma began as she scooped loose tea into the pot, “the mind can be like these leaves—dry and brittle, not flexible. But when you add water, the leaves become supple and can bend.” She covered the pot and we waited for the tea to steep.

“So, how do we add water to our minds?” I asked, my attention on wisps of steam escaping the spout. They carried the scent of peach, my favorite.

“We walk the beach.”

Questions gathered on my tongue, but my queries were halted when she asked that I hold the strainer so she could pour. We took our mugs and settled on the porch to look at the bay.

“We will walk in the morning, at half past seven. You can ask questions then. The rest of today we relax.”

Morning sun warmed our backs as we strolled along the shoreline. Gentle waves lapped against the sand and swirled water around my feet. I bent to collect the remains of a mussel shell. Its edges were deeply chipped, but the two halves were still attached at the center, forming a silhouette. “It looks like people kissing,” I said, and held it out to Oma.

She leaned close to inspect the shell. “Are you thinking about kissing?” she asked, her question light and curious.

“No,” I answered quickly, my face warming.

She started walking again. “Then why show your stomach?” She waved a hand at my crop top.

My cheeks flamed. Like my mother and Gran, Oma didn’t seem to understand my desire to wear trendy things, to be like my friends. However, her words conveyed disappointment, not reprimand, which made me feel embarrassed instead of angry.

“Anna, a kiss is fine. This shirt, too, when appropriate, like here at the beach.” She took my arm to steady herself in the sand. “But if you want your mother to respect your choices, to trust your judgement, then give her reason to do so. From clothes to kisses, you are responsible for your decisions. So, ask yourself: ‘What does this say about me? Does this benefit or hinder who I want to be?’”

“You mean like how I want to be a dancer?”

“Not exactly.” She chuckled. “I mean how you want to be, ja?”

I flipped the shell around in my hand as we continued along the shore. How do I want to be? No one had asked me this before. The question made sense when I thought about Gran's words: "What happened to the nice girl you used to be?" Did I want to be nice? Sure, but not always—not when I felt pushed. "Oma? Do I always have to be nice, even to my mom and Gran?"

She tilted her head from side to side as she considered my question. "Not always."

This was good news!

"But you should always be kind."

"How?" I asked. "They won't even listen to my side of things. It's frustrating."

She asked for the shell I carried. She looked it over, rubbed its rough surface with her thumb. Then, she kissed my temple. "You tell me," she said, and tossed the shell into the bay.

"I was going to keep that!" Annoyance shot through me.

"I know."

Shock slackened my jaw, but anger started to twist and grow in my chest. "Then why'd you throw it away?" I asked, stomping a foot in the sand.

"I wanted to."

"Oma! That wasn't nice, or kind."

"No, it wasn't. Yet, you are being kind—asking me why and pointing out that I wasn't nice instead of accusing me of being mean." She smiled.

I exhaled my remaining anger. "It was just a shell."

She patted my arm. "Good. Now you understand what it means to water your mind." She gently tapped my nose. "Maybe tomorrow I will throw away your little shirt."

"Omaaa!"

I had to hold her steady while she hooted with laughter.

Scents of flour and yeast greeted me the next morning. A towel-covered bowl sat on the table, and Oma was at the sink washing measuring cups.

"Today we make challah," she announced as I kissed her cheek and retrieved a mug. I poured tea from the pot resting on the stove. It was light and didn't need sugar.

After drying her hands, Oma moved to the table and sprinkled a circle of flour from the canister. "People are like bread," she said, as I took the seat opposite her. "Many ingredients mixed together to make something new." She punched down the soft dough a few times, scooped it from the bowl, and kneaded it for several minutes on the floured surface. With a sharp knife, she divided the lump into four segments. Together, we rolled each portion into tapered strands. "You, your mother, your grandmother, and I are like these strands," she said. "Four pieces of a whole."

I nodded.

She laid the pieces side by side, then pinched them together at the top. “Now, always using the strand on the right”—she demonstrated as she spoke—“weave it over, then under, then over the three other pieces. You do the rest.”

“Over, under, over,” I whispered while plaiting, the fragrant strands silky under my fingertips.

“Ja, good.” She bobbed her head, then patted mine, leaving flour prints in my hair. “This is the secret to good challah, and to life.”

“What do you mean?” I asked while following her gestured instructions to pinch the ends and tuck them under.

“Braided dough produces a strong loaf,” she told me as she reached for a baking pan already lined with parchment. “But a braided loaf also understands its need to separate with ease if it is to nourish.” Carefully lifting the bread, she placed it on the pan. “I learned this with my daughter, your grandmother, who learned it with your mother.” Oma wiped her hands on the towel, slid into a chair, and looked me in the eye. “Now, your mother is learning how to separate while nourishing you.”

“If she went through this with Gran, then why is she so tough on me? How is that nourishing?”

Oma shrugged. “Because it’s easy to forget the hard parts of being young.” She guided stray hair behind my ear. “But also, when you are a mother, you think mostly about protecting your daughter . . . and, also, yourself.”

Herself? “What does my mother need to be protected from?”

“The heartache of losing her little girl.”

“It makes her sad that I’m growing up?” I couldn’t wait to get older, go to high school and then college. How could that upset my mother?

“Not sad, but . . . melancholy, ja? She is proud of the woman you are becoming, but also, she misses the child you were—the child who depended on her.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure I understood. Shouldn’t my mother be happy that I was learning to take care of myself?

“OK, time for you to water your mind again. Go sweep the porch while I make egg wash for the bread and put it in the oven.”

“I thought walking the beach was how I watered my mind.”

“That’s one way; there are hundreds. Cleaning is the best.”

I was suspicious. “You’re making that up.”

“Ha! I’m old, Anna. I don’t need to make things up because I know everything.”

Shaking my head, I grabbed the broom and walked toward the door—Oma’s gleeful laughter followed me the entire way.

A warm breeze fluttered the curtains and carried the water’s salty aroma to me as I settled into bed that night. I thought about everything Oma had told me and wondered what would happen tomorrow when my mother arrived to take me home. I didn’t feel any different, so I didn’t think I’d be able to stop myself from arguing with her in the future. And I certainly didn’t know who, or how, I wanted to be. Earlier, when I told Oma all of this, she said not to worry, such things take time. She told me I’d naturally evolve into my best self if I remained mindful, if I kept the thought, “How do I want to be,” in my head as I made choices. This would also help when my mother and I disagreed. She said to not concern myself with feeling different. I’d know when a change occurred.

I looked out the window at the rising moon and hoped Oma was right. Yawning, I closed my eyes and let the bay’s gentle rolling soothe my fears.

Oma was scrabbling eggs when I entered the kitchen. A grapefruit half awaited me, and I happily dug a serrated spoon into its flesh. Its tart juices puckered my mouth and made me feel as if I were swallowing sunshine.

“Your mother called last night. They should be here soon, maybe ten minutes.”

The spoon froze midway to my lips. “What? So soon?” It wasn’t even eight o’clock.

“Ja. They left early.”

Wait a minute. They? “Is my dad coming?”

She scraped eggs into a bowl and covered it with a plate. “No, your grandmother.”

“Oh, no!”

“What? Suddenly you don’t like your grandmother?” She lifted an eyebrow.

“No, it’s just . . . things were so bad that morning.” Dropping the spoon, I slapped my hands over my face. “They’re going to gang up on me the whole ride home.”

Oma tapped me on the head with her spatula. “Stop being so silly.”

“Hellooo,” a voice called from the front door.

They were here.

I had no time to hide.

Oma met Gran and my mother in the living room, where many hugs and kisses were exchanged. I sat on my hands and waited. Minutes ticked by like hours until, finally, my mother entered the kitchen. She greeted me with a smile. That was good sign. Maybe everything would be fine.

Her forehead creased. “Anna, why is there egg in your hair?”

Or maybe not. I kept my mouth closed and shrugged.

“That’s my fault,” Oma said as she and Gran joined us. “Mina, get the plates.” Oma pointed Gran to a small stack on the counter. “And the bread, Janie. We need that too.”

My mother picked up the loaf Oma and I had made yesterday and set it on the table. Sitting, she cut several pieces and passed them around while the rest of us served ourselves eggs.

Silence settled over the table as the others ate. I pushed my food around, appetite gone, and peeked at my mother. She had stopped eating and was staring at the loaf. Then, she looked at me.

“Anna, I brought you here because we needed a break from each other.”

An ache knotted in my chest. Her words hurt, even though I had thought the same thing at the time.

Oma knocked her fork against the hand my mother had resting on the table.

Pink color seeped into my mother’s cheeks as she brushed egg from her hand. “And, because I knew Oma would teach you how to make challah. I remembered how much her lessons helped me when I was your age.” Her blush deepened. “I fought with my mother too.”

Curiosity pushed through my hurt. “About what?”

She lifted a shoulder. “The same things: clothes, makeup, chores.”

“Smoking,” Gran added.

Whoa! I looked, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, at my mother.

She scowled at Gran, who shrugged. Oma smiled and continued eating.

My mother sighed and popped a bit of bread into her mouth. Her expression turned thoughtful as she chewed. Then, she touched the hand Oma had bumped earlier and color crept into her face again. “Oh, Anna.” Her eyes filled with remorse. “I’m so sorry. I never should have said we needed a break. That must have upset you.”

I nodded as a lump settled in my throat.

“I’m also sorry for bringing you here without any explanation. I was mad, but that’s no excuse.”

I took a shaky breath. “I’m sorry, too—for being mean.”

She came over and hugged me and kissed my head, then stayed to pick the eggs left by Oma’s spatula from my hair. It felt good to have her close.

She looked at Oma. “Thank you for nudging me. I’d forgotten the most important part—to be mindful. It was such a long time ago.”

“Pssht. You don’t know ‘long time ago’ yet.” Oma squeezed the hand my mother offered. “But now the memory is fresh again, ja?”

I felt my mother nod.

“Did Oma tell you that cleaning is the best way to water your mind?” my mother asked as she combed her fingers through my hair.

I chuckled. “Yeah, but I think she’s fibbing.”

“Me too.” Gran said, shooting her mother a sideways glance.

“Bah.” Oma waved her fork in the air, sending bits of egg everywhere. “None of you know anything. It’s a good thing I’m still here.”

Our laughter rang through the cottage loud and long, and something shifted inside me. The atmosphere was different. I was different—and knew it, just like Oma had said. I felt connected to my mother and Gran. It was no longer me and them, it was . . . us.

The girl’s terse “No!” pulled me from my reminiscing. Her father had joined her in the water and offered to tug her around on an inflated raft. Her mother watched from the shoreline with rigid shoulders—I expect she foresaw a quarrelsome afternoon.

I rummaged through my beach bag for a pen, then turned to the blank page at the end of my book. I fervently wrote down the recipe for challah and directions for braiding a three-strand loaf—including that each strand represents a person. I also included sage words from the wisest woman I’ve known: “Keep your mind supple by ‘watering’ it with simple pleasures or tasks—like walking the beach or baking bread. A supple mind helps shape how you want to be.”

I tore out the page, creased it in half, and slipped it into the mother’s tote while they were still in the bay.

A smile spread across my face as I closed my umbrella and folded my beach chair. Oma would be delighted to know I had secretly passed on her wisdom. I imagine it’s something she would have done herself.

I left my beach things on the porch and went into the cottage to start water for tea. As I scooped leaves into the china pot, I swore I could hear Oma’s voice:

“Anna, you forgot to tell them cleaning is the best!”